

A Sound of Thunder



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Bradbury spent his childhood in Waukegan, Illinois with his parents Leonard and Ester before the family moved to Los Angeles, California in 1934. A voracious reader, Bradbury decided to become a writer around the age of 12. After finishing high school, however, Bradbury could not afford to attend college and instead educated himself by reading at the public library. He earned a living by selling newspapers while he worked on his writing, finally selling his first story “Pendulum” in 1941, just before the United States entered World War II. Bradbury was not drafted due to his poor vision and managed to become a full-time writer during the war. He published his first collection of short stories, *Dark Carnival*, in 1947. That was also the year he married Marguerite “Maggie” McClure, with whom he would have four daughters. Bradbury published his best-known work, *Fahrenheit 451*, in 1953. The book, which was incredibly well-received, spoke the era’s concerns about censorship and conformity. Bradbury also wrote numerous screenplays and television adaptations of books, including his own works. He won many literary awards during his long career. Bradbury reportedly wrote daily throughout his life, allowing him to publish over 30 books and more than 600 short stories. He passed away at the age of 91, leaving behind his daughters and several grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“A Sound of Thunder” was written shortly after World War II and during the Cold War, a circumstance reflected in Bradbury’s concern about authoritarian rule. The United States, fresh from its conflict with Nazi Germany, now feared the expansion of the communist Soviet Union and the possibility of nuclear warfare. While it does not deal directly with nuclear politics, “A Sound of Thunder” does explore the ways in which new technology may exacerbate political dangers.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Time travel is a popular subject for science fiction and fantasy works. One of the best-known stories on the topic is “The Time Machine” by H.G. Wells, published in 1895, which deals with a trip to the future rather than the past. Arthur C. Clarke’s 1950 story “Time’s Arrow” also depicts a trip back to the time of the dinosaurs and explores the dangers of time-travel. Bradbury’s concern with authoritarian governments also appears in other works of his, such as *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Totalitarianism was a very common concern for authors following the First and

Second World Wars, appearing in classic novels such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) as well as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Environmentalism, meanwhile, became a popular theme slightly later in the twentieth century, most notably with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), a nonfiction account of the negative effects of pesticides on the environment.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Sound of Thunder
- **When Written:** 1952
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** June 28, 1952
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science fiction
- **Setting:** The U.S. in the year 2055, and North America or an equivalent landmass in 60 million BC
- **Climax:** The Tyrannosaurus Rex charges the hunting party and is shot while Eckels retreats off the path
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Travis
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

The Butterfly Effect. “A Sound of Thunder” introduced the idea that a single butterfly could change the world in huge and unanticipated ways, and is often credited as the origin of the phrase “the butterfly effect” in chaos theory. In fact, the butterfly effect is not derived from Bradbury’s work, but from a paper on weather systems by scientist Edward Lorenz, who considered whether the turbulence caused by the flapping of a butterfly’s wings could later change the path of a tornado. However, Bradbury’s story is still a good illustration of the butterfly effect in action.

Failed adaptation. “A Sound of Thunder” has been adapted for TV and film multiple times, most notably in the 2005 feature length film starring Ben Kingsley. Despite the short story’s ongoing popularity, the film was poorly received; film critic Roger Ebert classed it with movies that “want so much to be terrific that they explode under the strain.”



PLOT SUMMARY

In the year 2055, Mr. Eckels enters the office of Time Safari, Inc. This company offers safaris to the past in order to hunt

dinosaurs and other large prehistoric animals. Eckels greets the company official, who informs him that there are no guarantees that he will come back alive.

While waiting for his safari guides, Eckels makes small talk by expressing his relief that Keith was victorious in the recent presidential election. The official agrees that Keith is the best candidate for American and democratic values, asserting the Deutscher would have brought about a dictatorship. Eckels takes another moment to reflect on the danger of the expedition, hands over his check, and departs with the safari guide Mr. Travis.

Eckels settles into the Time Machine alongside Travis, fellow guide Lesperance, and two other hunters. The Machine blazes back through time as the travelers get settled with oxygen helmets. Eckels nervously contemplates the rifles they all hold, and eventually the passengers find themselves in the prehistoric past.

Upon descending from the Machine, Travis emphasizes that the travelers must not disturb the natural environment. He exhorts the hunters to stay on the metal Path that hovers over the ground in order to prevent stepping on any plant or animal. Crushing even the smallest life form, he explains, could disrupt ecological balance and change the future, not just of nature, but of human society. Lesperance explains that the party can safely shoot the specific animal he has previously marked for them, because he has already traveled back in time to find a creature that would die of some accident anyway and looped back to mark it with paint. Eckels asks him whether their hunt will be a success, but the guide explains that there is no way to know because one cannot meet oneself while traveling through time.

Soon the Tyrannosaurus Rex approaches with a sound of **thunder**. Eckels is transfixed when he comes face to face with the massive creature, proclaiming it impossible to kill and that he wishes to retreat. Lesperance directs him to wait in the Time Machine. Instead, dazed, Eckels wanders off the path while the other hunters shoot and kill the fearsome dinosaur.

Travis returns to find Eckels in the Time Machine. Realizing that Eckels wandered off the path, Travis yells that his transgression could ruin the company and threatens to leave him behind. He eventually orders Eckels to retrieve the bullets from the carcass. When Eckels returns, covered in blood, they leave for the future.

When they arrive, Travis orders Eckels to leave and never come back. Eckels, however, lingers for a moment, noticing that the atmosphere and small things about the office have changed. He slumps down into a chair and, examining his boots, finds that he has crushed a **butterfly**. Panicking, he asks the official about the election results and learns that Deutscher has won. After a few moments of pleading to go back and fix things, Eckels waits in silence while Travis aims a gun at him. Eckels hears Travis click the gun's safety, followed by a sound of **thunder**.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Eckels – The protagonist of “A Sound of Thunder,” Eckels is a hunter who enjoys exotic safaris and decides that traveling back in time to shoot a dinosaur is the logical next adventure for him. At the Time Safari, Inc. office, Eckels discusses the recent election with the company official and expresses his approval for Keith’s win over Deutscher. He also jokes that he’d be running away to the past if the election had gone differently, ironically foreshadowing the ways in which his trip will change history. Eckels is nervous as he departs on his safari with Mr. Travis, Lesperance, and two other hunters. Eckels, who has seemed marked for death throughout the story, repeatedly asks for assurance of his safety and seems to want to master life and death on this dangerous hunt without facing any real risks. When faced with the T. rex and its sound of **thunder**, however, he finds that he is not prepared to face his own mortality. Instead, he wanders off the path and accidentally crushes a **butterfly**—a mistake that irrevocably changes history and ostensibly leads Travis to shoot Eckels in the story’s final moments (accompanied by another “sound of thunder”). Eckels exemplifies a person meddling with forces that they do not fully understand, and he overestimates his ability to keep his cool under pressure. His fate demonstrates the danger of allowing people to play with new technology: even with safety precautions, human error is always a possibility.

Mr. Travis – A safari guide employed by Time Safari, Inc., Mr. Travis leads the expedition on which Mr. Eckels sets out. Travis has a keen sense of the danger of their trip, but he is primarily concerned with protecting the bottom line. He stresses how much Time Safari, Inc. pays the government in order to stay in business and warns the hunters that they must avoid straying from the path at all costs. He also scolds Eckels for handling his gun improperly. Yet despite his apparent concern for rules, Mr. Travis also appears volatile and impatient. For instance, he responds with anger when Eckels does not keep total silence during the dinosaur’s approach. And after the hunt concludes, Travis becomes enraged when he realizes that Eckels has strayed from the path. He laments the huge government fine to be paid and suggests leaving Eckels behind, although that would only compound the damage to the past. Lesperance talks him down from this extreme punishment, but Travis still forces Eckels to retrieve the bullets from the dead animal’s corpse. After returning to the present, Travis tells Eckels to leave and never return. When Eckels draws attention to his mistake of stepping on a **butterfly**, however, Travis responds with deadly force. Impervious to Eckels’ pleas, he aims his rifle at the man’s head and concludes the story with another sound of **thunder**.

Lesperance – Lesperance is another guide employed by Time Safari, Inc. His duty is to travel back in time ahead of a

scheduled safari and find a dinosaur that is going to die anyway, then loop back again to mark the creature with red paint. The process is supposed to ensure that the hunters do not disturb the natural order. Lesperance appears more sympathetic than does Mr. Travis, protesting his punishment of Eckels.

Company agent – An unnamed official who greets Mr. Eckels when he first arrives at Time Safari, Inc., as well as when he returns from the safari. He emphasizes the danger of the trip and the company’s lack of liability for any harm Eckels may suffer. He also discusses the presidential election with Eckels, giving a description of Deutscher as an “anti-everything man.”

MINOR CHARACTERS

Keith – The presidential candidate who has just been elected when Mr. Eckels departs on his time safari. Keith represents democracy and American values, as opposed to the dictatorial tendencies of Deutscher.

Deutscher – The presidential candidate who has just lost to Keith when Mr. Eckels departs on his time safari. Deutscher represents foreign and authoritarian values and is described as an “anti-everything man.” Upon returning from the safari, Eckels learns that in this new timeline Deutscher has won.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CAUSE AND EFFECT

In “A Sound of Thunder,” Ray Bradbury imagines a world in which humanity can take touristic journeys back in time. As Eckels, a man on a prehistoric hunting trip, discovers, however, even the slightest alteration to the past can forever alter the course of history; after accidentally crushing a **butterfly** underfoot 65 million years ago, Eckels returns to a present drastically different from the one he’d initially left behind. Small actions can have major repercussions, and, as with much of Bradbury’s work, the tale condemns the hubristic use of increasingly powerful technology in a world that human beings do not fully understand. By emphasizing the drastic effects of something as seemingly mundane as crushing a butterfly eons in the past, the story suggests the intimate connection between the past, present, and future, and ultimately argues that every action, no matter how small, has consequences.

The company offering the time travel experiences, Time Safari, Inc., at first seems to understand the dangers of altering the

past, as is evidenced by the precautions and warnings given to potential travelers. The company emphasizes that it does not guarantee any particular outcome—not even its clients’ safe return. Before setting off, Eckels has to sign a release of all liability, which the company’s agent explains in terms of danger during the safari: “Those dinosaurs are hungry.” The company has also set up anti-gravity pathways to prevent safari goers from interacting with the world around them and pre-selected dinosaurs that would have naturally died within minutes of being shot by time-traveling hunters anyway.

Mr. Travis, Eckels’s guide, explains the theory behind the company’s many safety precautions to ensure minimal effects on the past from their safaris. At such a great distance into the past, he says, tiny shifts could snowball over time and have a huge impact on human civilization. Things that seem small to Mr. Eckels because they have little impact in an ordinary human lifetime, such as stepping on a mouse or a plant, could mean much more when the time scale of their consequences is millions of years.

Nonetheless, there are penalties in place for the possibility that someone might go off the path—suggesting that the company’s precautions are not as failsafe as they should be, given its alleged appreciation of the danger of altering the past. While the company can account for some causes that might lead to changes in the past, and therefore the present and future, it overestimates its ability to control events and overlooks the ever-present element of chance. For example, when the dinosaur frightens Eckels, he does not have the presence of mind to follow instructions and return to the time machine. Instead, he wanders off the path, and the safari guides do not notice until the damage is already done.

Bradbury seems to thus be presenting a sort of naïveté on the part of humankind; the company paradoxically articulates the immense danger of changing the past in any way, yet also foolishly believes in its own ability to safeguard against such changes. Mr. Travis admits, “Maybe Time *can’t* be changed by us [...] We don’t know. We’re guessing.” The precautions taken by Time Safaris, Inc., then, are based on an incomplete understanding of what time travel technology can do. This element of uncertainty gives the scenario a hint of recklessness, as human beings are meddling with powers they do not fully understand.

Even the smallest slip-up proves enough to set a cascade of historical changes in motion. When Eckels wanders off the path, he does little more than trample a few plants and step on a butterfly. This tiny act of destruction, however, sets in motion a total political upheaval and even changes to the English language back in the year 2055. The first hint that Eckels sees is the sign in the Time Safaris, Inc. office, which now reads “TYME SEFARI INC.” He quickly discovers that the changes go much deeper than simple spelling, this time with an ironic twist. When Eckels first arrived in the office, he joked with the

company's agent about the possibility of wanting to escape the present if Deutscher rather than Keith had won the election. Upon returning, he finds that his trip to the past has caused Deutscher to win after all.

The plot of "A Sound of Thunder" hinges on the idea that the relation between cause and effect is far more complex than humans might like to think. Bradbury uses the conventions of science fiction to explore the consequences of using technology without fully understanding it. His story anticipates a future when humans will be able to meddle with history, and demonstrates how futile and misguided such an effort would be. Bradbury urges readers to raise the question of whether some technological advances serve only to facilitate human hubris.



AUTHORITARIANISM, FASCISM, AND NOSTALGIA

While "A Sound of Thunder" takes place in the 2050s, it is in many ways just as much about the concerns of the 1950s. Writing in the aftermath of World War II and at the outset of the Cold War, Bradbury embeds the fear of anti-American authoritarianism in his text. He paints a portrait of futuristic America as an imperialist nation that has found a new direction for its colonial energies (that is, the past), yet is threatened from within by the specter of fascism (represented by the political candidate Deutscher). Bradbury does not stop there, however: by portraying time travel as a literal manifestation of nostalgia for a simpler past, his narrative suggests that such nostalgia may in fact bring about an authoritarian threat from within.

While the characters in "A Sound of Thunder" see the past as new territory ripe for exploitation, the present is filled with anxiety about the political direction of the country. The entire narrative is framed by the previous day's presidential election, which is a clear choice between true-blue American democracy and German-influenced dictatorship. Mr. Eckels fears the possibility that the United States might be compromised—even colonized—by these "foreign" values.

During the story's opening scene, Mr. Eckels expresses his relief that presidential candidate Keith was elected, joking that he "might be here now running away from the results" if that were not the case. The company agent for Time Safari, Inc. describes the other candidate, Deutscher, as "an anti-everything man." It is important to note that Deutscher is a stereotypically German name; given the fact that this story was published during the 1950s, shortly following World War II, pairing a German name with fear of "the worst kind of dictatorship" was likely intended by Bradbury to invoke the recent fear of Nazi Germany taking over much of the Western world. It also resonates with Cold War era fears of communist East Germany and the Soviet Union. The contrast with the

ordinary, stereotypically American-sounding name "Keith" makes this clash of cultures particularly clear. Mr. Eckel's remark about "running away" via time travel, in turn, casts the past as a potential way out of the political fears of the present. If fascism or communism is knocking at the door, Eckels sees a return to a purportedly simpler world as the secret passage out.

The characters in Bradbury's story are also specifically concerned with changing the trajectory of history in a way that might impact *Western* society, and especially the United States. For example, when trying to drive home the point that the safari has reached the prehistoric past, Mr. Travis lists off a number of historical figures significant to Christian and European history who have not been born yet, such as Christ, Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler. He does not name any important figures from other parts of the world and he refers to the date in years "before President Keith," reinforcing his Western (and ultimately America-centric) view of human progress. Yet it is precisely this future—including the implicit victory of democracy over fascism—that is imperiled when Eckels steps off the path. Upon returning to the future, the safari group finds themselves in the midst of the very event that Eckels had joked about escaping: the election of "anti-everything man" Deutscher.

When Eckels's blunder during the trip brings about a change in election results, Bradbury demonstrates not only the danger of meddling with history, but also an implicit relationship between nostalgia and authoritarianism. "A Sound of Thunder" shows that American democracy will not be saved from fascism or communism by a return to some earlier state. In fact, it is the excessive nostalgia imbued in time travel to the past that brings about this awakening of authoritarianism from within the United States.



MORTALITY

Bradbury portrays Eckels as deeply concerned with mortality. His hobby of trophy hunting gets its thrill from feeling a certain power over life and death, and his choice to take a time travel safari derives partly from advertisements portraying triumph over aging and death. When confronted with genuine mortality, however, in the form of the dinosaur, Eckels decides to flee; later, this attempt survive ultimately brings about his own death, when a guide shoots him. Even time travel, Bradbury shows, can only offer brief respite from the deathly "sound of **thunder**." Bradbury thus uses a technology that can seemingly reverse the order of life and death in order to show that death is, in fact, inevitable.

Time Safari, Inc. markets itself as not simply offering the thrill of hunting prehistoric game but of transcending mortality by reversing its cycle. Eckles, looking into the furnace of the time machine, recalls advertisements about rising "out of chars and ashes" and returning via birth or seed to "the time before the

beginning.” Such claims turn the ordinary cycle of life and death on its head; not only can customers visit another point in time, the company suggests, but they can in some sense reverse the flow of time itself. The company’s advertising inherently illustrates the hubris necessary to treat time—and the attendant processes of life and death—as one’s personal playground.

Indeed, despite choosing to undertake the massively dangerous safari to hunt a dinosaur, Eckels repeatedly seeks assurance that he will survive the trip. He clearly wants to experience having power over life and death without the risk, and becomes angry when the company agent insists that there are no guarantees of his safety. He asks again for reassurance when the guide Lesperance reveals that he’s already gone back in time to tag their dinosaur, and again appears deeply unsatisfied with the guide’s response that “there’s no way of telling” whether he will make it out alive. Eckels’s desire for reassurance asks for the impossible: the thrill of a dangerous situation without any actual danger. When the dinosaur finally appears in the story as a sort of death-machine, accompanied by a “sound of thunder,” Eckels suddenly realizes just how dangerous a situation he is in, observing, “It was never like this before. I was always sure I’d come through alive.”

Eckels seems particularly aware of his body and of the threats that surround him, and Bradbury’s descriptions of Eckels seem to mark him for death from the beginning of the story. This foreshadowing supports the broader point that death, for Bradbury, is inevitable, regardless of technological innovations. Multiple points in the story focus on Eckels’ physicality—his eyelids, the feeling of phlegm in his throat, his stiff jaw and trembling arms. He often seems aware of but almost separated from his body, as when he “felt his mouth saying” a phrase rather than simply speaking. He remains stiff and pale during the safari, in contrast to his livelier companions. And when retreating from the hunt, Eckels walks away in a zombie-like stupor, as if he were already dead.

In addition, Eckels is surrounded by signs of imminent death. The narrative gaze, following his eyes, fixates on the deadly weapons—“blue metal guns”—of the safari party in the time machine. During the safari, the scenery includes “flowers the color of blood” and the “death grin” of the dinosaur. Through his recognition of these signs—and particularly the terror of seeing the dinosaur—Eckels wanders off the path, crushing a **butterfly** and ensuring that he will be met with another deadly “sound of thunder” in the form of a gunshot by the story’s end; as he begs to go back in time once again to stop himself from stepping off the path, Mr. Travis, another guide, shoots him (likely to stop his blabbing but getting the group in trouble).

“A Sound of Thunder” thus explores mortality as at once a thrilling source of power, an advertising ploy, and an inevitability. Even as Eckels finds himself drawn in by the danger and excitement of reversing time in order to hunt a

deadly predator, his attempts to survive only lead to his own demise. Even the boldest technological advancements are subject to the laws of nature, and as such it is folly, the story suggests, to attempt to defeat mortality.



ENVIRONMENTALISM

“A Sound of Thunder” explores the human relationship to ecology and the natural environment. Through the device of time travel, Bradbury is able to show the potential impact of human interference in the environment on seemingly unrelated events. In Bradbury’s world, humanity is inextricably intertwined with the environment, which human beings foolishly often influence with little care for the future. Even with precautions in place, damage is always possible. The story points to the idea that people may not realize the impact of their actions on the environment until it is too late.

Time Safari, Inc., as represented by safari leaders Mr. Travis and Lesperance, appears to have an understanding of the potentially disastrous impact of their safaris. The company has a number of safety precautions in place to avert harm to or contamination of the environment, and Travis takes care to explain the need for such care to Eckels. Precautions against altering the ecology of the past include both technological solutions and rules for safari-goers’ behavior. For example, the Machine and all its contents must be sanitized prior to the trip, and the time travelers wear special oxygen helmets to prevent them from introducing future bacteria into the past. The safari team also relies on a floating metal pathway to prevent physical contact with any plants or animals in the jungle.

Travis emphatically warns the group to stay on the path, and when asked why the path is necessary, launches into a detailed explanation of ecological dependencies, the food chain, and the possible impacts of stepping on the wrong plant or animal. He clearly understands the chain of events by which killing “an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even” could lead to “infinite billions of life forms [...] thrown into chaos and destruction.” He goes on to detail the potential impacts on human civilization, such as preventing cities or whole countries from ever being founded. This explanation underscores the idea that all life on the planet is connected, and every life form is potentially of equal significance. Humans must be good stewards of the environment in order to preserve this delicate balance upon which both the natural and the civilized world depend.

Knowing the risks, it would make more sense not to travel to the past at all. Time Safari, Inc., however, is interested primarily in making money, a detail through which Bradbury condemns short-sighted human concerns that come at the expense of the natural world. When he enters the office at the beginning of the story, Eckels hands over a check for ten thousand, a hefty sum for a brief journey. The company’s official informs him that

there is an additional ten-thousand-dollar fine if he disobeys instructions. This detail suggests that a price *can* be put on the potentially irreversible damage to the environment. Eckels must also sign a liability waiver before the journey, ensuring that the company cannot be sued for any harm that befalls the safari guests. Clearly, Time Safari, Inc. is intent on protecting their profit margin.

Later, when Eckels goes off the path, Mr. Travis's initial concern is for the financial impact on the company: "That *ruins* us! We'll forfeit! Thousands of dollars of insurance!" Indeed, in this moment Travis also expresses what one could read as a possible motive for killing Eckels at the end of the story: "I'll have to report to the government. They might revoke our license to travel." With Eckels alive and expressing his horror at the changed future, it would be impossible to cover up what happened. As the company official makes clear prior to the safari, however, deaths on these hunts are extremely common. There is a distinct possibility, then, that killing Eckels is part of a plan to cover up what happened in order to stay in business. Regardless, it is clear that Time Safari, Inc. engages in business practices that threaten the balance of the natural world on a large and dramatic scale, and their employees focus on preserving their profit margin above all else.

Bradbury suggests not only the importance of protecting and respecting the environment, but the finality and irreversible nature of environmental destruction. For instance, in spite of the primary financial motive explored above, Mr. Travis *does* react strongly when Eckles wanders off the path. His reaction, however, is too little, too late. Having failed to prevent this error, Travis attempts to punish Eckels, but he cannot undo the environmental destruction Eckels has already caused. After considering the option of leaving Eckels behind, Travis instructs him to retrieve bullets from the dead Tyrannosaurus, leading to further unnecessary contact with past: Lesperance even protests that Travis "didn't have to make him do that." No one fully realizes what Eckels has done until he notes the changes in the future and finds the dead **butterfly** on his shoes. By this time, there truly is nothing to be done. No one responds to his pleas to "take it back" or "make it alive again." Instead, the only thing left is retribution and/or a cover-up, which Travis sets in motion by shooting Eckels.

In "A Sound of Thunder," Bradbury ultimately paints a picture of humanity's partial understanding of ecology, and people's failure to preserve the natural environment. Although Bradbury wrote in a time before the major advances of the modern environmentalist movement, his story resonates with many of the lessons of conservationists. If people meddle with the natural world, they may not know what they have done until it is far too late.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THUNDER

Thunder in the story represents the inescapability of mortality as well as the dangers of human hubris. As a natural phenomenon, thunder underscores the fact that death is part of the natural order; it is a sometimes-frightening occurrence brought about by things beyond human control. These factors have contributed to the use of thunder in literature as a symbol or manifestation of divine power. In "A Sound of Thunder," sounds of thunder notably herald the arrival of challenges to Eckels's hubris—that is, to his belief in his ability to control life, death, and even time. Thunder comes up twice, once accompanying the dinosaur that Eckels intended to hunt, and again as the sound of a gunshot that presumably kills Eckels in the tale's final moments; by first introducing thunder as the sound of the approaching deadly dinosaur, Bradbury is able to repeat the sound at the end of the story and imply that Mr. Travis shoots Eckels without stating it outright. In both cases, the sound emanates from a powerful creature or machine unaffected by humanity's whims or desires. By invoking thunder's divine associations in the context of mortal peril, Bradbury underscores the idea that even with technology allowing control over the flow of time, death cannot be fully conquered.



BUTTERFLY

In "A Sound of Thunder," the butterfly is a symbol of the delicate ecological balance of the natural world. Although it is small, Bradbury reminds us, a butterfly—like every other creature—has its own role to play in the environmental order. The butterfly becomes the most visible manifestation of Mr. Travis's warning that crushing even the tiniest creature could prove disastrous for all of humanity. While Travis does not specifically mention butterflies in his extended explanation of the dangers of interfering in the prehistoric environment, he names various small life-forms such as "a small bird, a roach, a flower even" as potentially important. The butterfly that Mr. Eckels crushes is, in a sense, the intersection of all of these things: a small, beautiful flying insect. It is so delicate as to have initially gone unnoticed in the aftermath of the hunt. Only after witnessing the subtle changes to the future's atmosphere does Eckels think to check his boots and find the crushed insect. The butterfly's green and gold coloration also echoes the description of the Tyrannosaurus rex, implicitly suggesting that its death is just as significant as the dinosaur's.

Further, today's reader may be reminded of "the butterfly effect," a chaos theory term describing how small changes to a system can lead to broad and unpredictable consequences. This dynamic is played out in "A Sound of Thunder": by stepping on and killing a butterfly, Eckels inadvertently changes the course of natural and human history. Through unknown means, the death of this small creature changes the result of the U.S. presidential election, illustrating the interdependency between humans and the natural world.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow edition of *A Sound of Thunder & Other Stories* published in 2005.

A Sound of Thunder Quotes

☛ Out of charrs and ashes, out of dust and coals, like golden salamanders, the old years, the green years, might leap; roses sweeten the air, white hair turn Irish-black, wrinkles vanish all, everything fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings, suns rise in western skies and set in glorious easts, moons eat themselves opposite to the custom, all and everything cupping one in another like Chinese boxes, rabbits into hats, all and everything returning to the fresh death, the seed death, the green death, to the time before the beginning.

Related Characters: Mr. Eckels

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Eckels recalls the advertisements for Time Safaris, Inc. While standing beside the time machine just after entering the office, Eckels contemplates the remembered imagery of reversing time. The backwards movement to "a time before the beginning" tempts him with mastery on several levels. Going back in time seems to reverse natural phenomena and the order of cause and effect. Like big game hunting, it allows Eckels to imagine being in command of the environment. It may even offer the opportunity to overcome mortality, if the reversal of aging is taken into consideration.

However, even in this paragraph, there are clues that the power of time travel is not so simple. Returning to the past goes beyond the start, back to a different iteration of death—"the fresh death, the seed death, the green death." Death is, after all, a part of nature, and can never be entirely

avoided. This passage foreshadows the unexpected deadly consequences of Eckels' safari.

☛ "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Deutscher had gotten in, we'd have the worst kind of dictatorship. There's an anti-everything man for you, a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual..."

Related Characters: Company agent, Mr. Eckels (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 212


Explanation and Analysis

After arriving in the office and inspecting the Time Machine, Eckels makes small talk with the company agent behind the desk, resulting in this exchange about politics. It is here that Bradbury introduces the dangers of authoritarianism into the story. Although this theme remains in the background for much of the narrative, the political discussions at the beginning and end of "A Sound of Thunder" help frame the narrative. By bringing up the political conflict between all-American Keith and foreign-sounding, "anti-everything" Deutscher, Bradbury links speculation about time travel to real-world concerns about politics. This discussion also serves as an inverted piece of foreshadowing to the surprise ending of the story, when time travel leads to political disaster instead of the other way around.

☛ Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species. [...] The stomp of your foot, on one mouse, could start an earthquake, the effects of which could shake our earth and destinies down through time, to their very foundations.

Related Characters: Mr. Travis (speaker), Lesperance, Mr. Eckels

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after arriving in the past, Mr. Travis explains the importance of following the rules and not stepping off the path. Human disruption of the prehistoric environment could have massive unforeseen consequences, and there is simply no way to predict what tiny error could cause a massive change in the natural and human future. While Lesperance assists somewhat with the explanation, Travis is the primary target of Eckels' continuous questions for more details. The warning against killing "an important animal, a small bird, a roach" once again foreshadows the mistake on which the story's entire logic turns: the crushing of a single butterfly.


☞ The jungle was wide and full of twitterings, rustlings, murmurs, and sighs.


Suddenly it all ceased, as if someone had shut a door.

Silence.

A sound of thunder.

Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 217


Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. Travis speaks about the importance of staying on the path and Lesperance explains that, although he has pre-tagged the dinosaur with paint, he does not know the outcome of their hunt, the safari party awaits the approach of the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. In this passage, the small sounds of life in the prehistoric jungle suddenly fall silent as the predator approaches, giving the impression of stasis or death. The sudden silence is followed by the titular "sound of thunder," an overwhelming natural phenomenon that will come to symbolize mortality. The thunder's appearance here, at the approach of the *Tyrannosaurus*, lends it deadly meaning that will emerge once again in the final line of the story.

☞ "It can't be killed." Eckels pronounced this verdict quietly, as if there could be no argument. He had weighed the evidence and this was his considered opinion. The rifle in his hands seemed a cap gun. "We were fools to come. This is impossible." [...] Eckels, not looking back, walked blindly to the edge of the Path, his gun limp in his arms, stepped off the Path, and walked, not knowing it, in the jungle.

Related Characters: Mr. Eckels (speaker), Lesperance, Mr. Travis

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 218-219


Explanation and Analysis

Following the terrifying thunder of its approach, Eckels is overwhelmed at the sight of the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. He realizes that, in spite of all the careful preparations and equipment that have gone into the safari, there is a very real risk of death from this enormous creature. His desire to flee mortal danger leads him to wander off the path. Eckels goes into a numb, almost catatonic state, as if the mere approach of the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* and its thunderous footfalls have pushed him closer to death. Ironically, Eckels' fear of immediate threats to his life leads him to commit the very dangerous form of interference with the natural world that Travis has warned him to avoid. His unknowing foray into the jungle parallels the ways in which humans interfere with the natural world without regard for the consequences of their actions. Eckels' terror of death drives him to ignore the delicate balance of nature and the unpredictable effects of his influence on the jungle.

☞ We can't take a trophy back to the Future. The body has to stay right here where it would have died originally, so the insects, birds, and bacteria can get at it, as they were intended to. Everything in balance

Related Characters: Lesperance (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

The other hunters succeed in shooting the Tyrannosaurus, and after its death Lesperance offers them the opportunity to take a picture with the creature's body. Here he is explaining that they cannot take a physical trophy with them to the future due to the risk of disrupting the natural environment, which could lead to countless unforeseen consequences. The body of the dinosaur must remain to decompose and provide nutrients to the smaller creatures that will feed on it. While it is not directly mentioned here, the butterfly that Eckels crushes under his boot is implicitly tied to the mention of "insects" as one of the important classes of creatures that must not be deprived of their food source. The policy against taking trophies back to the present demonstrates that Time Safaris, Inc. has some understanding that environmental balance is delicate and must be preserved to avoid potentially disastrous changes to the future.

☞ This *ruins us!* We'll forfeit! Thousands of dollars of insurance! We guarantee no one leaves the Path. He left it. Oh, the fool! I'll have to report to the government. They might revoke our licence to travel. Who knows *what* he's done to Time, to History!

Related Characters: Mr. Travis (speaker), Lesperance, Mr. Eckels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221


Explanation and Analysis

After the hunt concludes and the party returns to the Time Machine, Eckels apologizes for wandering off, and Mr. Travis explodes in anger. His first concern, however, is not for the immeasurable damage that Eckels may have done to the planet's future, but for the fine that the company will have to pay for violating the terms of their permission to travel back in time. He understands the broader dangers to some degree—he does, after all, comment on the uncertainty over what Eckels might have changed. But like so many profit-driven companies that exploit natural resources for their own gain, in this moment Travis only really seems to care about the financial consequences of Eckels' mistake.

☞ Eckels felt himself fall into a chair. He fumbled crazily at the thick slime on his boots. He held up a clod of dirt, trembling. "No, it *can't* be. Not a *little* thing like that. No!" Embedded in the mud, glistening green and gold and black, was a butterfly, very beautiful and very dead. "Not a little thing like *that!* Not a butterfly!" cried Eckels.

Related Characters: Mr. Eckels (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

After returning to the future, Eckels notices subtle changes in the atmosphere. The air feels strange and different. Further, he realizes that the sign on the wall of the office has changed spelling systems. Frightened of what may have happened, in this passage he sits down to find out what he could have stepped on to bring about these changes in his own time. The butterfly that he finds is an example of the very small creatures that Keith warned him against crushing. By accidentally killing this small, delicate insect, he has brought about changes of unknown scope to the natural and human worlds. His continued denial appears to be an attempt to logically bargain himself out of the situation—surely such a small creature could not have caused the changes he fears! Unfortunately for him, this denial does little other than alerting others that something strange has happened.

☞ "Who won the presidential election yesterday?" The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know very well. Deutscher, of course! Who else? Not that fool weakling Keith. We got an iron man now, a man with guts!"

Related Characters: Mr. Eckels, Company agent (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after finding the butterfly, Eckels thinks back to the most important recent event: the presidential election. Here the foreshadowing present in the initial pages of the story is fulfilled in a twisted, ironic fashion. As the company

officer told Eckels before his trip, the company does not conduct “escapes” from undesirable political circumstances. It appears, however, that Eckels’ blunder has brought about the very political future that he feared. Dictatorial, foreign-sounding Deutscher has replaced Keith as president-elect, effectively putting into motion the slide towards authoritarian government that Eckels had been so relieved to avoid.

The seeds of this shift are planted throughout the story, not just in the initial conversation between Eckels and the company officer, but also in Mr. Travis’s speech about the potential impact of small environmental shifts on human society over millenia. For Eckels, this comes as a massive shock, but for the reader, it is a clear fulfillment of several of Bradbury’s thematic concerns for the story. Cause and effect turn out to be difficult to predict over long periods of time; even the smallest pieces of nature may be more important than anyone realizes at the time; and authoritarian rule must be guarded against vigilantly on all sides.



☞ ... “can’t we take it *back*, can’t we *make* it alive again? Can’t we start over? Can’t we—”

He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, shivering. He heard Travis breathe loud in the room; he heard Travis shift his rifle, click the safety catch, and raise the weapon.

There was a sound of thunder.

Related Characters: Mr. Eckels (speaker), Mr. Travis

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

Realizing the gravity of what he has done, Eckels wants to go back in time and somehow fix his mistake. As the rest of the story has shown, however, even time travel is not enough to overcome death and gain total control over the flow of events. Eckels falls silent, realizing that his pleading will accomplish nothing. He simply waits for whatever fate will befall him. The centering of the story’s descriptions on Eckels’ perceptions give a visceral sense of the last moments of his life. He hears Travis, a man he knows to be angry and volatile, shift about and prepare his gun. From there, one can logically conclude that the sound of thunder, first heard with the approach of the deadly Tyrannosaurus Rex, represents the gunshot that kills Eckels. His desire to control nature and have power over life and death leads finally to confronting and succumbing to his own inevitable mortality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A SOUND OF THUNDER

In the year 2055, Mr. Eckels enters the office of Time Safari, Inc., a company that offers trips to the past in order to hunt large prehistoric animals—including dinosaurs—for the price of ten thousand dollars. Eckels feels phlegm gather in his throat as he asks the company agent behind the reception desk whether the company guarantees he will come back alive. The agent informs him that there are no guarantees “except the dinosaurs,” and that if Eckels disobeys any instructions he will be fined another ten thousand dollars.

Eckels takes a moment to admire the Time Machine and remember the company’s advertisements—which, he recalls, tend to focus on the reversal of life and death. Eckels muses that with only “a touch of the hand,” gray hair and wrinkles could disappear; everything could “fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings.”

Eckels makes small talk with the company agent while waiting, discussing the recent presidential election in the United States. Eckels expresses relief that Keith was elected rather than Deutscher. The official agrees that Keith is the best candidate for American and democratic values, asserting that Deutscher—“a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual”—would have brought about dictatorship. The agent adds that people have called the company only semi-joking that if Deutscher won they’d want to go live in 1492; however, it’s not the company’s “business to conduct Escapes,” the agent adds.

The company agent asks Eckels to sign a release, reminding him that the dinosaurs he’s going to hunt are highly dangerous. Eckels responds in anger, but the official explains that the spiel is designed to scare of those not looking for “the severest thrill a real hunter could ever ask for.” The agent mentions that a number of clients and safari guides have died on the trips and offers Eckels the chance to tear up his check. Eckels hesitates, his fingers twitching, but the agent continues the transaction.

Although he is excited about the safari, even upon entering the office Mr. Eckels worries about the possibility of dying on the trip. As company policies lay out, however, there is no certain outcome to these trips. The agent’s emphasis on uncertainty gives Eckels pause, but not enough to prevent him from seeking this ultimate achievement of control over nature. This moment establishes the importance of following instructions, foreshadowing Eckels’s later fatal transgression.



Throughout the story, Eckels demonstrates a fascination with mortality and the possibility of its reversal. He seeks control over life and death in the sense of the hunter’s dominance over nature, but also in terms of his relationship to his own aging and death.



This portion of the story introduces the theme of authoritarianism. The presidential election represents a classic conflict between American democracy and totalitarian regimes. The German name Deutscher hints at connections with Nazi Germany but many of the values described could also refer to American views on Soviet Russia during the Cold War. The agent’s comment that the company does not conduct “Escapes” foreshadows the dark political direction this story will take and the inevitability of authoritarianism.



The agent’s statements about the danger involved in the hunt seem almost designed to provoke Eckels into showing his bravery—really, his bravado. His line about a “real” hunter implies that anyone who is not up for facing such a frightening prospect is not truly a hunter. Further, Eckels hesitates and never clearly affirms his intent to go on the safari, but the process seems to move forward in the absence of a decision. This echoes the way his actions in the past will start a chain of events over which he ultimately has no control.



The company agent hands Eckels over to the safari guide Mr. Travis, although it is unclear whether Eckels has actually stated that he would like to continue on the safari. The Time Machine begins to flash backwards through the years as the hunters and guides test out their oxygen and intercoms. Eckels sits stiff and pale alongside Mr. Travis, fellow guide Lesperance, and two other hunters.

Eckels nervously contemplates the rifles they all hold, tightly gripping his own gun. He asks Travis if the guns can “get a dinosaur cold.” Travis responds equivocally, noting that some dinosaurs have two brains and are too risky to hunt. He counsels Eckels to shoot for the eyes and into the brain.

Eventually, the flashing of day and night outside comes to a halt, the sun standing still in the sky. The fog gathered around the machine clears to reveal a prehistoric wilderness.

Travis begins a speech emphasizing that the travelers are now far, far in the past, listing the historical figures who have not yet been born. He exhorts the hunters to stay on the metal Path that hovers over the ground in order to prevent stepping on any important plant or animal and disturbing the natural environment. He reminds the hunters that there is a huge fine for anyone who fails to obey the rules.

Eckels expresses his confusion at the rules, prompting Travis to launch into a long explanation. The guide details a long list of potential blunders and their effects, such as stepping on one mouse and disrupting an entire future food chain. Crushing even the smallest life form, he explains, could disrupt ecological balance and change the future, not just of nature, but of human society. Eckels takes a somewhat adversarial role during this exchange, constantly questioning the connections that Travis draws between cause and effect.

Eckels appears filled with more than usual foreboding in this moment. He seems almost to have no agency, as if this adventure is happening to him rather than by his own choice. This again reflects the story’s broader sense of events being unpredictable and largely beyond human control. Further, his stiff and pale demeanor is almost corpse-like, adding to the many associations of Eckels’ character with death.



Eckels continues to display his nervousness about the deadly potential of the prehistoric environment. He seeks control over the situation. Travis’s response underscores the fact that, even given the number of precautions the safari company takes, outcomes are not entirely certain.



Through the height of human technology, the hunters find themselves in the midst of a vast and wild natural environment. The stillness of this moment is anticipatory, building interest in the action yet to come.



Travis’s speech serves to illustrate just how pristine this wilderness is, untouched by the march of human history. His reminders to the hunters are a part of Time Safari, Inc.’s efforts to control the outcome of their hunts and to protect the natural environment from interference.



Travis demonstrates a firm grasp of the idea that small changes may snowball into huge unintended consequences. Eckels, meanwhile, remains fixated on what he perceives as the disproportionate relationship between tiny organisms and the broad arc of human history. “A Sound of Thunder” puts Eckels’s and Travis’s competing theories to the test.



Seemingly grasping the rules at last, Eckels asks which animals are okay to shoot. Lesperance explains that the party can safely shoot the specific animal he has previously marked for them, because he has already traveled back in time to find a creature that would have died of some accident within minutes after the hunt regardless. Hearing this, Eckels reasons that Lesperance must know about the success or failure of the expedition. The guide explains that there is no way to know because one cannot meet oneself while traveling through time.

Eckels messes about with his gun a bit while waiting and Travis scolds him not to aim at anything but the dinosaur. Lesperance signals that the T. rex will soon approach. Eckels begins to muse on the incongruity of a moment when neither the new president nor any of the people celebrating exist yet. Soon the forest goes quiet, and the T. rex approaches with a sound of **thunder**. Eckels is transfixed when he comes face to face with the creature. Observing its massive, machine-like body, he proclaims it impossible to kill and wishes to retreat.

Travis tries to silence Eckels, then directs him to wait in the Time Machine and promises to refund half his fee. Eckels, recoiling in horror from the creature's metallic, insect-crusts hide, proclaims, "It was never like this before. I was always sure I'd come through alive." Lesperance reiterates the instructions to wait in the machine. Instead, dazed and unable to follow directions, Eckels wanders off the path while the guides and the other two hunters shoot at the dinosaur bearing down on them. Despite the fearsome sight it presents, the T. rex falls dead, and the jungle is silent.

The hunters and guides are all profoundly effected by the creature's bloody end, some cursing and others vomiting in disgust. Travis returns to find Eckels shivering on the floor of the Time Machine. He retrieves supplies for the other hunters to clean the creature's blood off themselves as they observe the carcass. The body settles into the stillness of death like "a wrecked locomotive or a steam shovel at quitting time." Lesperance offers two hunters who shot at the dinosaur a chance to pose for a photo, explaining that they cannot take any trophies with them. They decline, and all return to the Time Machine to find Eckels still huddled on the floor.

Time Safari Inc.'s precautions seem both extreme—multiple trips back in time to find one dinosaur—and insufficient. After all, they may be picking a creature destined to die, but who is to say that shooting the dinosaur will not cause it to fall slightly differently, and land on an insect or a flower that would otherwise have played a crucial role in history? This suggests the company's hubris in its belief that it can entirely control the conditions of the safari. Eckels once again finds himself wishing for certainty and baffled by the safari leaders' simultaneous precision and lack of pertinent information.



In the lead up to the encounter with the dinosaur, Eckels acts excited, almost playful. He marvels at the strange circumstances. Travis, on the other hand, braces for a serious encounter. The T. rex's approach, heralded by a booming sound like thunder, brings a very real possibility of death into the narrative. This "sound of thunder," appearing twice in the story, becomes a symbol of mortality and the inevitability of death.



Eckels, as a big game hunter, seems to have fancied himself as brave, even fearless. He realizes in looking at the fearsome T. rex that he cannot face true uncertainty as to whether he will live; he only enjoys hunting when he has clear control over his prey, and the story insists that human beings overestimate their power at their own peril. The dinosaur seems almost beyond life, its body both machine-like and reminiscent of decomposition. In trying to avoid death, Eckels makes the fatal mistake of interfering with the prehistoric wilderness. His error will change the course of history.



The T. rex's death is horribly gruesome, leaving even the less squeamish safari goers shaken. Travis appears hardened and unconcerned with Eckels's panic attack. This scene poses an implicit critique of trophy hunting, both in terms of the horrors it brings and for the ways that it hardens people. The men who paid to go on this trip leave with not even a souvenir, nothing but the bloody memory of an incomprehensibly large creature destroyed.



Eckels finally says, “I’m sorry.” Travis, realizing that Eckels wandered off the path, yells and him and threatens to leave him behind. He is incensed that Eckels would violate the rules and put the business at risk of fines or even being shut down by the government. He eventually orders Eckels to retrieve the bullets from the dinosaur carcass. Lesperance scolds Travis for this, telling him that it was unnecessary, but Travis is unconvinced. He rants about the uncertainty of what parts of the future Eckels might have changed.

When Eckels returns, covered in blood, they leave for the future. Lesperance suggests the punishment was unnecessary, but Travis claims that it will prevent Eckels from hunting “game like this” in the future. Travis threatens Eckels, who protests his innocence, sure that his brief lapse could not have changed anything.

When they arrive, Travis observes the office with suspicion. Assured by the company agent that everything is alright, he orders Eckels to leave and never come back. Eckels, however, lingers for a moment, noticing that the atmosphere and small things about the office have changed. The air smells different; the colors are ever so slightly off; and, most tellingly, the sign over the desk is written with a different spelling system.

Eckels slumps down into a chair and, examining his boots, finds that he has crushed a small **butterfly**. Its green and gold wings glisten as his mind races with thoughts of dominoes, wondering how something so small could change the future. Panicking, he asks the company agent about the election results and learns that Deutscher has now won.

After a few moments of pleading to go back and fix things, Eckels waits in silence, eyes closed. He hears Travis take a breath, raise his rifle, and release the safety on his gun. The story ends with a sound of **thunder**.

Even Travis, who seems to understand the dangers of time travel and the unpredictability of cause and effect better than anyone, is primarily concerned about the bottom line. Although not spelled out, it seems that leaving Eckels in the past (perhaps claiming that he was eaten by a dinosaur) might be a way around government reprimands for the company. Only as an afterthought does he mention the potential environmental and historical damage.



Neither Lesperance nor Eckels want to believe that a small error like stepping off the path could lead to any major changes. Travis is skeptical of this optimism, and he maintains his anger over Eckels’s lapse in judgment.



Travis is eager to get rid of Eckels, but Eckels finds himself jarred out of hopeful optimism by the realization that this is not quite the same future that he left behind. His senses all tell him there are small, almost intangible differences in the atmosphere, while the sign confirms that human culture has changed as well. Apparently, his venture off the path has changed something after all.



The butterfly represents chaos. It is the tiny, delicate element that nonetheless changes everything. Its green and gold coloration recalls the T. rex, setting up parallel instances of environmental destruction. Even this tiny casualty of negligence can have a huge effect—in this case, it has brought about the very authoritarianism that Eckels joked about escaping. This passage contains many interlocking ideas, including the perils of carelessness with nature, the ever-present threat of fascism, the unpredictability of consequences, and the unseen value of every life.



Eckels’s desire to go back and fix what he has broken is too little, too late. All that is left is retribution. The sound of thunder in this passage, echoing the sound of the T. rex bearing down on the hunting party, likely represents a gunshot, with Travis killing Eckels to punish him for his mistake—and to destroy the evidence.





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